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ABSTRACT

Attitude change was measured on four different topics before and immediately after a persuasion was presented in order to compare the degree of change with the level of ego involvement as it relates to topic controversiality. Ego involvement was based on self-ratings of concern for each topic. Objective topic controversiality was based on the average level of ego involvement in each topic for all subjects. The following hypotheses were upheld: attitude change could be produced, even on highly ego-involving and controversial topics; and the more controversial the topic, the less attitude change would be created by the persuasion. A third hypothesis, that higher levels of subjective ego involvement would produce lower amounts of attitude change, was not supported. (Author)

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Ego Involvement and Topic Controversiality as Related to Attitude Change

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Ego Involvement and Topic Controversiality as Related to Attitude Change

A major area of investigation in social psychology is the study of attitude change. Much research has been generated and reported on the four important factors which influence the amount of attitude change: the communicator, the communication, the recipients, and the context in which the communication is presented.

One important and yet inadequately researched variable is the subject's ego involvement with the attitude in question. Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall (1965) postulated that "the more the person is involved in the issue, the less susceptible he will be to short-term attempts to change his attitude." This statement would appear to be valid, but there has been little empirical documentation of this phenomena. Hovland (1959) and Zimbardo and Ebbesen (1970) both state that the general rule in selecting attitude change topics is to employ non-ego-involving issues, believing that ego-involving issues in a study creates the risk of not obtaining measureable changes, especially with small subject groups. Again, there is no empirical evidence to support this hypothesis.

The purpose of our study was to empirically document the relationship between attitude change and ego involvement with topic. A number of hypotheses were formed: (a) there

would be some attitude change, even on highly ego-involving topics; (b) the more controversial the topic (objective ego involvement), the less attitude change would be created by the persuasion, and vice versa; (c) the more subjectively ego-involving the topic, the less attitude change would be created by the persuasion, and vice versa.

Method

The study was designed to compare the degree of attitude change with the level of ego involvement as it relates to topic controversiality. Attitude change was measured on four different topics before and after a persuasion was presented. Ego involvement was based on self-ratings of concern for each topic. Objective topic controversiality was based on the average level of ego involvement in each topic for all subjects.

The four topics were chosen to provide a varying degree of controversiality among the subjects and varying degrees of ego involvement for each individual. The topics were: the Draft; the Equal Rights Amendment; Daylight Savings Time; and the election of the Houston City Councilmembers by district or at-large. On each topic, two alternative versions of a persuasion were prepared, one in favor of the issue, and one giving the opposite view.

Attitude questionnaires were first administered four weeks before the persuasion, and again immediately after

the persuasion. In both questionnaires, there were two key questions on each topic. One was a statement that was positive towards the particular topic and the other was negative. This acted as an internal check for attitude consistency of the individual subjects and also for an acquiesence effect.

The subjects were college students in three sections of an undergraduate General Psychology course at the University of St. Thomas. Participation in the study was optional and class grades were not contingent upon participation.

The first questionnaire was designed to measure both attitudes and ego involvement on the four topics and was presented as the "University of St. Thomas Attitude Scale". Subjects were told it was an attitude survey of the university students conducted by the Psychology Department. The key questions bearing on the four topics were imbedded in many other unrelated questions. Attitude measurement was based on a five-point Likert type scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". Ego involvement was measured by a three-point scale from "Very Concerned" to "Not Really Concerned" about the particular issue.

The second presentation was given four weeks after the first and was presented as the "University of St. Thomas Political Information Test". The format and appearance of the second questionnaire differed from the original one as it was desired that the subject not associate this

survey with the first. Packets were made up for each subject, containing a written persuasion which was in disagreement with the subject's previously stated attitude on each of the four topics. This was an attempt to persuade them to change their original attitudes. All of the subjects neutral on an issue randomly received either a positive or a negative statement. "False packets" were constructed for those students who had not participated in the first presentation, but would be in class for the second. The students not present for the first and the second presentations were not included in the study.

Following each persuasion were five statements, two being the key questions on the attitude from the initial questionnaire. Subjects were instructed to read each passage carefully and indicate their degree of agreement with the statements at the bottom of each passage. This agreement was indicated on a five-point Likert type scale identical to that used on the first questionnaire. The amount of attitude change was measured by the number of points changed from the subject's original attitude to his attitude on the second questionnaire. Negative values were given the change points if the subjects moved away from the persuasion. This indicated a strengthening of the original attitude.

Results

There were differences among the four topics on the

degree of controversiality (mean ego involvement) as hypothesized on a priori grounds. The mean values of ego involvement for each topic, as measured by the key questions in the first questionnaire, are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

On all four topics, attitude changes occurred in the direction of the persuasion. These changes differed significantly from zero on a t-test, regardless of the controversiality of the topic. Zero being the subject's original stance on the issue (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

Both parametric and non-parametric analyses of variance by topic indicated that attitude changes of the four topics differed significantly beyond the 0.0005 level. A non-parametric analysis of variance indicated that the mean attitude change score for Houston City Council was significantly greater than the other three topics. No other topics were significantly different from each other.

A Pearson Product Moment Coefficient of Correlation between ego involvement and attitude change scores for all four topics combined was not significant. Correlations

between ego involvement and attitude change scores for each topic individually were also not significant. Thus, subjective ego involvement was not shown to be significantly related to attitude change scores.

A two-way analysis of variance showed that the three classes of students did not differ significantly from each other in amounts of attitude change.

Discussion

The hypothesis of the authors that attitude change could be produced, even on highly ego-involving and controversial topics was upheld. This is contrary to the assertions of Zimbardo and Ebbessen (1970) and Hovland (1959) that using highly ego-involving issues in a study creates the risk of not obtaining measureable changes. All of the persuasions were significantly effective in changing the attitudes of the subjects.

The hypothesis that the more objectively ego-involving the topic (more controversial), the less attitude change would be created by the persuasion was also upheld by the experimental results. This supports the conventional wisdom that it is more difficult to convince a person to change his attitude on a controversial topic, and less difficult to change his attitude on a non-controversial one.

The experiment, however, does not support the third experimental hypothesis that susceptibility to change can

be predicted by the subjective level of ego involvement. On all four topics, there was no significant relationship between subjective assessment of ego involvement and attitude change scores. Thus, it would appear that an individual's evaluation of his own ego involvement in a particular issue is generally not related to the susceptibility of his attitude to change, although it is possible to say that it is less difficult to change his attitude on topics that are not controversial.

The change in attitudes on all topics could be regarded as a regression to the mean effect e.g., extreme attitudes on the first questionnaire tend to move towards the mean on the second questionnaire. However, regression to the mean cannot explain the interaction of topic with attitude change..

There are many questions raised by the results of this study. First, more research needs to be done with attitude change on controversial topics, as it has been the conventional wisdom that they could not be changed. Secondly, the subjects in this study were mainly college freshmen. It is possible that their age allowed them to be more easily persuaded on all topics, and that they were less certain about their attitudes than older subjects would be. Therefore, the authors suggest that research of this type be carried out with subjects of different ages and socio-economic groups. Thirdly, the authors believe that results

may be affected by knowledge of the topic and suggest that further research look into the possibility of interaction of topic knowledge with topic controversiality and susceptibility to attitude change. Finally, the results reported in Table 2 are only for short-term attitude changes as the study did not look at long-term effects of persuasion on controversial topics. If these attitudes were measured after an interval of a month or more, it is possible that the persuasion would have no lasting effects.

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Table 1

Topic Controversiality

(Scale of 1-3, 3 denoting least amount of concern for topic)

Topic	N	Mean Ego Involvement
Daylight Savings Time	61	2.43
Houston City Council	61	2.18
Equal Rights Amendment	61	1.84
Draft	61	1.49

Table 2

Mean Attitude Change Scores by Topic

Topic	Mean Attitude Change Score	Level of Significance
Houston City Council	2.30	0.0001
Daylight Savings Time	1.44	0.0001
Equal Rights Amendment	1.34	0.0001
Draft	0.86	0.0014